

# The Genocide of Captive German Soldiers

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People in the countries that won World War II often referred to it as the “Good War,” a morally clear-cut conflict between good and evil.<sup>[1]</sup> This “Good War” is also claimed to have led to a good peace. After a period of adjustment, the United States generously adopted the Marshall Plan to help the Germans back onto their feet. Germany with the help of the Allies soon became a prosperous democracy that took its place among the family of good nations.

The above mistaken description ignores the Allies’ horrific mistreatment of Germans after the end of the Second World War. This article will examine the mass murder of captured German soldiers in the French and American prisoner-of-war camps.

## Introduction to the Allied Prisoner-of-War Camps

On July 27, 1929, the future Allied powers of World War II extended the Protective Regulations of the Geneva Convention for Wounded Soldiers to include prisoners of war (POWs). These regulations state: “All accommodations should be equal to the standard of their troops. The Red Cross supervises. After the end of the hostilities the POWs should be released immediately.” On March 10, 1945, Dwight Eisenhower, the supreme Allied commander of the Allied Expeditionary Force, disregarded these regulations by classifying German prisoners captured on German territory as “Disarmed Enemy Forces” (DEFs). The German prisoners were thereby at the mercy of the Allies and were not protected by international law.<sup>[2]</sup>

The Western Allies deliberately murdered approximately 1 million disarmed German POWs by means of starvation, exposure and illness. This Allied atrocity was first publicly exposed in 1989 in the book *Other Losses* by James Bacque. Dr. Ernest F. Fisher, Jr., a retired colonel in the U.S. Army and a distinguished army historian, wrote the following foreword to the third edition of *Other Losses*:

*Over most of the Western Front in late April 1945, the thunder of artillery had been replaced by the shuffling of millions of pairs of boots as columns of disarmed German soldiers marched wearily towards Allied barbed wire enclosures. Scattered enemy detachments fired a few volleys before fading into the countryside and eventual capture by Allied soldiers.*

*The mass surrenders in the west contrasted markedly with the final weeks on the Eastern Front where surviving Wehrmacht units still fought the advancing Red Army to enable as many of their comrades as possible to evade capture by the Russians.*

*This was the final strategy of the German High Command then under Grand Admiral Doenitz who had been designated Commander-in-Chief by Adolf Hitler following Reich Marshall Goering’s surrender to the west.*

*From the German point of view, this strategy delivered millions of German soldiers to what they believed would be the more merciful hands of the Western Allies under supreme military commander General Dwight Eisenhower. However, given General Eisenhower’s fierce and obsessive hatred not only of the Nazi regime, but indeed of all things German, this belief was at best a desperate gamble. More than 5 million German soldiers in the American and French Zones were crowded into barbed wire cages, many*

*of them literally shoulder to shoulder. The ground beneath soon became a quagmire of filth and disease. Open to the weather, lacking even primitive sanitary facilities, underfed, the prisoners soon began dying of starvation and disease. Starting in April 1945, the United States Army and the French army casually annihilated about 1 million men, most of them in American camps. Not since the horrors of the Confederate-administered prison at Andersonville during the American Civil War had such cruelties taken place under American military control. For more than four decades this unprecedented tragedy lay hidden in Allied archives.*

*How at last did this enormous war crime come to light? The first clues were uncovered in 1986 by the author James Bacque and his assistant. Researching a book about Raoul Laporterie, a French resistance hero who had saved about 1,600 refugees from the Nazis, they interviewed a former German soldier who had become a friend of Laporterie in 1946. Laporterie had taken this man, Hans Goertz, and one other, out of a French prison camp in 1946 to give them work as tailors in his chain of stores. Goertz declared that "Laporterie saved my life, because 25% of the men in that camp died in one month." What had they died of? "Starvation, dysentery, disease."*

*Checking as far as possible the records of the camps where Goertz had been confined, Bacque found that it had been one of a group of three in a system of 1,600, all equally bad, according to ICRC reports in the French army archives at Vincennes, Paris. Soon they came upon the first hard evidence of mass deaths in U.S.-controlled camps. This evidence was found in army reports under the bland heading Other Losses. The terrible significance of this term was soon explained to Bacque and me by Colonel Philip S. Lauben, a former chief of the Germany Affairs Branch of SHAEF.*

*In the spring of 1987, Mr. Bacque and I met in Washington. Over the following months, we worked together in the National Archives and in the George C. Marshall Foundation in Lexington, Virginia, piecing together the evidence we uncovered. The plans made at the highest levels of the U.S. and British governments in 1944 expressed a determination to destroy Germany as a world power once and for all by reducing her to a peasant economy, although this would mean the starvation of millions of civilians. Up until now, historians have agreed that the Allied leaders soon canceled their destructive plans because of public resistance.*

*Eisenhower's hatred, passed through the lens of a compliant military bureaucracy, produced the horror of death camps unequalled by anything in American military history. In the face of the catastrophic consequences of this hatred, the casual indifference expressed by the SHAEF officers is the most painful aspect of the U.S. Army's involvement.*

*Nothing was further from the intent of the great majority of Americans in 1945 than to kill off so many unarmed Germans after the war. Some idea of the magnitude of this horror can be gained when it is realized that these deaths exceed by far all those incurred by the German army in the west between June 1941 and April 1945. In the narrative that follows, the veil is drawn from this tragedy. [3]*

*Col. Fisher sat on a U.S. Army commission investigating allegations of war crimes committed by American soldiers in 1945. He later said that the commission was "a whitewash." [4]*

*After conducting his research in France, James Bacque realized that a catastrophe had been unleashed in the American and French POW camps. In the United States National Archives on Pennsylvania Avenue, Bacque found the documents with the heading Weekly Prisoner of War and Disarmed Enemy*

Forces Report. In each report was the heading Other Losses, which paralleled the statistics he had seen in France.

Bacque reviewed these reports with Col. Philip S. Lauben, who had been chief of the Germany Affairs Branch of Supreme Headquarters, Allied Expeditionary Force (SHAEF) in charge of prisoner transfers and repatriation. Bacque and Lauben went over the headings in the reports one by one until they got to the heading Other Losses. Lauben said, "It means deaths and escapes." When Bacque asked how many escapes, Lauben answered "Very, very few." Bacque later learned that the escapes were less than one-tenth of 1%.<sup>[5]</sup>

Bacque states that because some prisoner documents were false or ambiguous when made, and because many records were destroyed in the 1950s or hidden in euphemisms, the number of dead will always be in dispute. However, there is no question that enormous numbers of men of all ages, plus some women and children, died of starvation, exposure, unsanitary conditions and disease in American and French POW camps in Germany and France starting in April 1945.

Bacque estimates in *Other Losses* that the victims undoubtedly number over 790,000, almost certainly over 900,000, and quite likely over a million. The prisoners' deaths were knowingly induced by army officers who had ample resources to keep these prisoners alive. Relief organizations such as the Red Cross that attempted to help prisoners in the American camps were refused permission by the army.<sup>[6]</sup>

#### **How Could Such Atrocities Be Concealed?**

After the Allies defeated Germany in 1945, the press in Germany was directly licensed and censored by the victors. Eisenhower or his deputies ran everything inside Germany, so censorship was extremely easy to maintain. The Allies established a client government in which journalists, writers, artists and academics all supported "the West."<sup>[7]</sup> Both the German and Allied presses refused to publish anything concerning Allied atrocities, while stories about German atrocities were frequently published.

For example, Gens. George Patton, Omar Bradley and Dwight Eisenhower toured the German concentration camp at Ohrdruf on April 12, 1945. They saw more than 3,200 naked, emaciated dead bodies flung into shallow graves, with many more dead bodies lying in the streets where they had fallen. Soon after seeing Ohrdruf, Eisenhower ordered every unit nearby that was not in the front lines to tour the camp. Eisenhower stated: "We are told that the American soldier does not know what he is fighting for. Now, at least, he will know what he is fighting *against*."

Eisenhower also cabled London and Washington, urging delegations of officials and newsmen to be eyewitnesses to the camps. Eisenhower's message to Washington read: "We are constantly finding German camps in which they have placed political prisoners where unspeakable conditions exist. From my own personal observation, I can state unequivocally that all written statements up to now do not paint the full horrors."<sup>[8]</sup>

The tour of "liberated" concentration camps became a ritual in the occupied Germany of late April and early May. American officers forced local citizens and German POWs to tour the camps. German civilians were paraded against their will in front of the sickening piles of dead bodies found in the camps.

A long series of official visitors also began to answer Eisenhower's call for witnesses to the horrors in the camps. Congress chose a bipartisan joint committee to tour the sites of the camps, and the

Congressmen were all shocked at the conditions in the camps. In addition to the Congressional tour, Eisenhower arranged for a committee of distinguished American journalists to make a similar inspection of the camps. The American journalists all dutifully reported the horrors they had witnessed at the camps.[\[9\]](#)

Joseph Pulitzer, a German-American in the heavily German-American city of St. Louis, was so incensed by what he saw at the camps that he launched a campaign of public education. Pulitzer sought to dispel the belief in America that this talk of German atrocities was mostly propaganda. In cooperation with the federal government, Pulitzer's *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* conducted an exhibition of life-size photomurals made from the Signal Corps photographs of the camps. The photo exhibit was coupled with the showing of an hour-long motion picture documentary on the camps produced by the Signal Corps.[\[10\]](#) Soon virtually everyone in the civilized world had seen pictures of the horrific conditions in the German concentration camps.

Eisenhower could have allowed a very similar public exposure of the DEF camps he ran in Germany. For obvious reasons he did not. Censorship by SHAEF under Eisenhower's command was stricter than it had been during the war itself. The *New York Times* argued vigorously against this policy in a front-page news story on May 27, 1945: "The American people are being deprived of information to which they are entitled...It seems almost as though now that there is no enemy to fight, high Army officers are spending a large part of their time writing directives to circumscribe the movements and activities of war correspondents."[\[11\]](#)

The U.S. Army kept close watch over what the press was saying. Eisenhower and his staff carefully monitored and controlled how their reputations were treated by the press. Eisenhower even told a meeting of American newspaper editors, "I have always considered as quasi-staff officers, correspondents accredited to my headquarters." According to Gen. Patton, Eisenhower expected complete loyalty and solidarity in the event any of them was called before a congressional committee. Why was Eisenhower so wary of public opinion? Gen. Patton suggests an answer: because Eisenhower was using "practically Gestapo methods" against Germany.[\[12\]](#)

The United States government also refused to allow the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) to visit the German POWs, in direct abrogation of American obligations under the Geneva Convention. The ICRC under the Geneva Convention was supposed to visit the POWs in the camps and then report in secret to the Holding Power and the Protecting Power. On May 8, 1945, V-E day, the U.S. State Department informed the Swiss government that its role as Protecting Power for the disintegrated German government was void. With this done, the U.S. State Department informed the ICRC that there was no need to continue visits in Germany as the Protecting Power had been abolished. While ignoring the requirements of the Geneva Convention, the U.S. State Department informed the Swiss that the U.S. would continue to treat the POWs "in accordance with the provisions of the Geneva Convention."[\[13\]](#)

The exclusion of the ICRC and the Swiss government had disastrous consequences for the German POWs. The German POWs lost all means to tell impartial observers in private what was happening to them. The right to send and receive mail also disappeared with the ejection of the Swiss. The U.S. War Department imposed the most-damaging ban of all, covering all the U.S. camps, when it barred Red Cross parcels for the prisoners. This cut off the ability of German POWs to get food as well as to send news of their treatment to others and to receive news from home. No news from the camps would leak

out to disinterested observers. This allowed the treatment of German POWs to be conducted for many years in a secrecy that was maintained against all but the victims.[\[14\]](#)

Prime Minister William Lyon Mackenzie King of Canada made the only important protest on the Allied side against the removal of the ICRC from Germany. King's protest was quickly squelched by the British, who pointed out that the other Allies had all agreed that the German government was to be extinguished, and that to leave provisional representation of POW interests by the Swiss might be dangerous. Of course, what it would be dangerous to were the French and American governments. The mass murder of German POWs could not have continued if the ICRC had not been barred from visiting the Allied POW camps in Germany.[\[15\]](#)

Germans have been permitted to dig up mass graves of POWs at former Russian camps, but the German government has prevented the uncovering of evidence from the French and American POW camps. For example, Otto Tullius, a German prisoner who survived Bretzenheim, was a farmer who owned some of the land on which he was imprisoned with thousands of other POWs. After the camp was closed, the land was returned to Tullius, and he began farming there again. As Tullius plowed the land, he kept turning up detritus from the prisoners in the camp such as flasks, belt buckles, and tin dishes. In the 1980s, Otto Schmitt began to excavate on the land beside the Tullius house, searching for more artifacts or even bodies from the camp. Schmitt was forced to stop his excavation work when the police threatened him with a fine of 250,000 DM.[\[16\]](#)

At Rheinberg, German construction crews in the 1950s and gravediggers in the 1980s discovered human remains with German Army World War II identification discs. These human remains were jumbled closely together in common graves with no sign of any coffin or grave marker.[\[17\]](#)

Other evidence of mass graves of German POWs at American-run camps has been found at Lambach in Austria in early 1996. Horst Littmann, an expert recommended by the Austrian Ministry of the Interior, concluded that the bodies were from American POW camps at Hofau, Grüberfeld, and Kuhweide.[\[18\]](#) However, this evidence of mass death of German POWs was not reported to the public by any media.

Another example of Allied censorship is when Jean-Pierre Pradervand of the ICRC gave Gen. Bedell Smith, Eisenhower's chief of staff, pictures of starved, dying German prisoners at Thorée les Pins. These prisoners had recently been transferred from the Americans to the French. Pradervand's photographs disappeared into Eisenhower's office, not to be seen again until they reappeared as evidence of atrocities in French POW camps. Then the photographs disappeared forever. They are not preserved among the many photographs in the Smith collection at Abilene. The world press issued a story exonerating the U.S. Army, and the German POWs kept on dying.[\[19\]](#)

### **Closing Remarks**

One critic of *Other Losses* asks: "How could the bodies disappear without one soldier's coming forward in nearly 50 years to relieve his conscience?"[\[20\]](#) The answer to this question is that numerous American soldiers and officers did come forth to witness the atrocious death rate in the American and French POW camps. From low-ranking soldiers such as Martin Brech, Daniel McConnell, and Merrill W. Campbell, through middle-rank officers such as Ben H. Jackson, Frederick Siegfriedt, and Lee Berwick, to high-ranking officers such as Richard Steinbach, Henry W. Allard, James B. Mason, Charles H. Beasley,

Mark Clark, and Herbert Pollack, Americans have described the murderous conditions in the American and French POW camps. All of the American eyewitness reports are extended and confirmed by the thousands of Germans who have written letters, books and articles showing beyond reasonable doubt a high death rate in the Allied POW camps.

Gen. Eisenhower had deplored the Germans' futile resistance at the end of World War II because of the waste of their own lives. However, the Germans died faster in the French and American POW camps after they surrendered than they had during the war. By one estimate, ten times as many Germans died in the French and American POW camps as were killed in all combat on the Western Front in northwest Europe from June 1941 to April 1945.<sup>[21]</sup>

James Bacque ends his seismic report with an appeal for open-mindedness and understanding. Bacque writes: "Surely it is time for the guesswork and the lying to stop. Surely it is time to take seriously what the eye-witnesses on both sides are trying to tell us about our history. All over the Western world, savage atrocities against the Armenians, the Ukrainians and the Jews are known. Only the atrocities against the Germans are denied. Are Germans not people in our eyes?"<sup>[22]</sup>

Whenever a historian denies that the Western Allies mass murdered German POWs, I recall a conversation I had with an elderly German couple in the late 1990s. After the wife told me she had been in Berlin when the Red Army captured the city, I asked them the following question: Did you know that the Western Allies, led by the United States of America, intentionally starved to death approximately 1 million German prisoners of war after the war was over?

An agonized look of pain overtook the husband as they both said "Yes." The agonized look of pain on his face did not result from his merely having read a book. His pain came from lived experience.

Unfortunately, since he is a German, most historians ignore his pain, suffering and peril to his life.

## Endnotes

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<sup>[1]</sup> Terkel, Studs, *The Good War*, New York: Pantheon, 1984, p. vi.

<sup>[2]</sup> Gruettner, Maria, "Real Death Camps of World War II," *The Barnes Review*, Vol. XVIII, No. 4, July/August 2012, pp. 28-29.

<sup>[3]</sup> Bacque, James, *Other Losses: An Investigation into the Mass Deaths of German Prisoners at the Hands of the French and Americans after World War II*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition, Vancouver, British Columbia: Talonbooks, 2011, pp. xv-xvii.

<sup>[4]</sup> Bacque, James, *Crimes and Mercies: The Fate of German Civilians under Allied Occupation, 1944-1950*, 2nd edition, Vancouver, British Columbia: Talonbooks, 2007, p. xiii.

<sup>[5]</sup> Bacque, James, *Other Losses: An Investigation into the Mass Deaths of German Prisoners at the Hands of the French and Americans after World War II*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition, Vancouver, British Columbia: Talonbooks, 2011, pp. lxv-lxvi.

<sup>[6]</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. lxvi-lxvii.

<sup>[7]</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 142, 177.

[8] Abzug, Robert H., *Inside the Vicious Heart: Americans and the Liberation of Nazi Concentration Camps*, New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985, pp. 27, 30.

[9] *Ibid.*, pp. 69, 128-132.

[10] *Ibid.*, p. 134.

[11] Bacque, James, *Other Losses: An Investigation into the Mass Deaths of German Prisoners at the Hands of the French and Americans after World War II*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition, Vancouver, British Columbia: Talonbooks, 2011, p. 62.

[12] *Ibid.*, pp. 62, 142-143. The “practically Gestapo methods” quote is from Blumenson, Martin, (ed.), *The Patton Papers, 1940-1945*, Boston, Mass.: Houghton-Mifflin, 1974, p. 742.

[13] Bacque, James, *Other Losses: An Investigation into the Mass Deaths of German Prisoners at the Hands of the French and Americans after World War II*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition, Vancouver, British Columbia: Talonbooks, 2011, pp. 63-64.

[14] *Ibid.*, pp. 57, 64.

[15] *Ibid.*, pp. 64-65.

[16] *Ibid.*, p. xxxv.

[17] *Ibid.*, p. 41.

[18] Bacque, James, *Crimes and Mercies: The Fate of German Civilians under Allied Occupation, 1944-1950*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, Vancouver, British Columbia: Talonbooks, 2007, p. 45.

[19] Bacque, James, *Other Losses: An Investigation into the Mass Deaths of German Prisoners at the Hands of the French and Americans after World War II*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition, Vancouver, British Columbia: Talonbooks, 2011, pp. 96, 243-244.

[20] Bischof, Günter, “Bacque and Historical Evidence,” in Bischof, Günter and Ambrose, Stephen E., (eds.), *Eisenhower and the German POWs: Facts Against Falsehood*, Baton Rouge and London: Louisiana State University Press, 1992, p. 201.

[21] Bacque, James, *Other Losses: An Investigation into the Mass Deaths of German Prisoners at the Hands of the French and Americans after World War II*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition, Vancouver, British Columbia: Talonbooks, 2011, p. 59.

[22] *Ibid.*, p. 196.

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